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Miscasting the Marines

PARIS

Caught with his Marine guards' pants down, our former ambassador to Moscow has advanced the glandular theory of national security. Young Marine recruits were too immature to resist the honey trap set by the KGB for the Moscow embassy guards, Arthur A. Hartman now explains as he advocates recruiting older, family-oriented security staffers.

Hartman is partly right. The role that the Marines have been called upon to play at American embassies around the world has gradually grown over four decades without, it seems, anyone paying much attention to that evolution.

But the issues involved in the Moscow spy and sex scandal are much broader than the age of the security guards and their resistance level to lissome Soviet translators. Unless the mind-set that helped create this disaster is also changed, simply replacing 19-year-olds with 45-year-olds will not solve the problems that have now surfaced.

Three major errors led to the Moscow scandal:

1. The embassy lacked effective internal checks on the Marine guard system. By patiently subverting two marines who worked the same shift together, the KGB appears to have penetrated the most sensitive areas of the embassy, including the "bubble" enclosure where Hartman and his staff felt they were secure from the devices they rightly assumed listened to their every word elsewhere in the embassy.

Copying the British, who recruit married former noncommissioned officers from the armed forces to man embassy security staffs, might well change the nature of the vulnerability of embassy guards. But the KGB can be expected to single-mindedly target and seek to exploit new vulnerabilities.

Permanently confining security personnel to the embassy grounds to reduce the chances they can be "turned," as the Soviets apparently do abroad, would mean requiring them to give up the most basic rights that Americans possess. So, in my view, would a regular schedule for applying lie detector tests to embassy guards. But these draconian remedies are certain to be considered now.

2. The embassy was involved in facilitating CIA espionage efforts against the Soviets. Thus, there was something of significance to be gained by penetrating the embassy's

communications networks. Information gained in this way helped the Russians roll up the CIA Moscow network last year.

The view expressed in this space last September that "intelligence professionals in Europe doubt that [CIA defector Edward L.] Howard possessed enough detailed or current information about Moscow operations to account for the recent Soviet crackdown on U.S. agents and their Soviet contacts" was based on these professionals' surmise that embassy communications had been compromised.

Some other western nations keep espionage operations clear of their Moscow embassies. They run more "deep sleepers"—agents and contacts who would try to pass on information only of urgent and clear significance that would justify the risk of exposure.

3. The concept of U.S. embassy security in Moscow and elsewhere is an outmoded one that stresses physical security of documents rather than the urgent priority needed to protect communications.

The KGB's interest and skill in communications espionage should have long been evident to American policymakers. France discovered in January 1983 (and secretly told Washington shortly thereafter) that since October 1976 the KGB had been able to read every message between Paris and the French Embassy in Moscow thanks to the bugging of the embassy's six telex machines.

The Marines have been stationed in U.S. embassies since 1949, when they were assigned the mission of protecting classified material on embassy premises. The guards are the last ones to check embassy offices at night, whacking down dreaded "pink slips" on the desks and file cabinets of embassy personnel who leave out classified documents. They also gather up and destroy the burn bags of discarded classified material.

Investigators will be seeking to learn whether burn bags were turned over to the KGB. "But any documents they got from the bags would be of transitory value," said one expert. "The big payoff is the ongoing material they can get by getting a transmitter into the sensitive communications equipment."

It has long been time to reevaluate the role of the Marines at the embassies. It is doubly painful that this will occur only after a scandal that has compromised national security and tarnished the Corps' proud reputation.